

First Hand Case Study: Tom Day talks about herbal leys



Size: 280 acres

Location: Kent

Soil Type: Weald Clay

Mixture: Herbal Ley, Maximum Yield Two Year Silage Ley, Forage Rape.

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When the spring of 2020 brought drought, herbal leys were the only forage left for Tom Day's sheep to graze.

Tom is a 4th Generation Farmer and his family has been farming the 280 acre tenanted farm in the Weald of Kent since 1900. Originally, the farm was mixed. 'It had pretty much everything you could ever imagine being on a farm,' says Tom. But gradually the less profitable enterprises got dropped and since Tom took over management in 2008 he has focussed predominantly on sheep as well as producing some hay and haylage for the local horse market. There are 450 breeding ewes; Romney and Romney crosses, with a Beltex tup to improve the carcass quality of lambs.

Weald clay is heavy and notoriously difficult to work, in the summer it bakes out, while in winter it's wet, sticky and unworkable, Tom decided to try herbal leys after reading about them in the Cotswold Seeds catalogue.

'I started using Cotswold Grass Seed's mixtures eight years ago because the catalogue is so informative, full of fresh ideas which helped me to think outside the box. I was keen to try herbal leys. They sounded great to repair and improve soil structure and workability and I liked the environmental benefits too.'

Tom has been using herbal leys for three years across fifty acres, so the farm now comprises 100 acres of permanent grass and pasture and the rest is in rotation between Cotswold Seeds' maximum yield ryegrass for haylage and herbal leys, with forage rape as a break crop between the grass.

'The sheep far prefer the leys to permanent pasture,' Tom says. 'We used to setstock and heavily graze a field then move them on, but now we're learning to mob-graze. The clovers, legumes and grass comes back quicker and there is always a fresh bite in front of the sheep. It was also good to talk it all through with Cotswold Seeds who were always there at the end of the phone for advice and can tailor mixtures depending on what I need.'

Tom's most recent herbal ley was sown last summer when weather conditions were right and the soil was most workable. It had established well by autumn and came back strong. The hot, dry spring of 2020 was especially difficult for reliable grass growth so Tom was glad he'd started the herbal leys journey.

‘A lot of the permanent grass just withered, shriveled and was gone. Thanks to the deep roots, the mob-grazed herbal ley was still going strong and providing plenty of food for the sheep.’

Tom says he definitely intends to carry on with herbal leys. ‘I like the variety of species and environmental benefits and the sheep do love it.’

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